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ABSTRACT

A case study was undertaken of a student teaching situation in which the operational behavior styles of the student and the cooperating teacher were quite different. According to the tool used for the study (Gregorc style delineator: A self-assessment instrument), the student teacher tested high in random style categories while the cooperating teacher tested high in the sequential style categories. Data collected throughout the 16-week student teaching experience included original observation documents, transcripts of audio recordings of interviews and conferences, logs, and questionnaires. The cooperating teacher appeared to be well organized and was conscious of the time factor in reaching instructional objectives. The student teacher exhibited behaviors characteristic of his random style: emphasis on relationships, need for positive feedback, variations on the use of time, and devaluing of organizational methods in general and of planning lessons and units in particular. These characteristics were evident during the entire 16-week period, including the time of preparation for the student's solo teaching experience. Among the conclusions drawn from study of this "critical" case is that some effort to match operational behavior styles may mean the difference between a satisfactory student teaching experience and an unsatisfactory one. (AMH)

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STYLE MISMATCH OR LEARNING DISABILITY: A CASE STUDY

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STYLE MISMATCH OR LEARNING DISABILITY:

A CASE STUDY

Since classroom teachers have long reported the student teaching experience to be the most valuable part of their teacher training (Stratemeyer, F.B. & Lindsey, M. 1958), it is important that this experience be as effective as possible. Sometimes, however, the student teacher's relationship with the supervising teacher does not work and the experience becomes uncomfortable or demeaning. Wheeler (1988) suggests that the rapport that is developed between a classroom teacher and a student teacher is in part a function of the training offered to the supervising teacher. Questions to be asked as a result of this knowledge might then be, "How is this rapport developed and nurtured throughout this critical relationship?" "What role does supervisory training play?" And, concomitantly, "What happens within the relationship when the rapport is missing?"

This particular case was chosen for in-depth examination because it was earmarked by methods professors and subsequently by the university supervisor as a critical case (Yin, 1984) prior to the student teaching semester. The critical case is valued for the depth and breadth of description which can be collected, for the continuity of data collection

by a single researcher, and for the acceptance and trust built with the subject over the time period by the researcher.

At the beginning of the student teaching semester, the styles of the student teacher and the supervising teacher were found to be quite different. The tool used to examine the style relationship between the student teacher and his supervising teacher was the style orientation model devised and refined by Anthony Gregorc (1985a). This model does not identify teaching or learning styles specifically but is applied broadly to what Gregorc calls one's "natural" style of operational behavior (1989). The student teacher tested high in both "random" style categories while the supervising teacher tested high in the "sequential" style categories.

Gregorc suggests that people are alike and yet differ on the four quadrant model according to the way each values the amount of structure and sense of abstractness inherent within themselves. Though all people possess elements of all four styles, most people operate from one strong point, especially in times of stress or distress. A brief description of each of the four characteristic styles identified by Gregorc follows:

1. Concrete sequential (CS) style people tend to operate in well-ordered, step-by-step progression where details and schedules are important and conventions are followed. This person often possesses

refined physical senses and uses these senses to validate the tangible world.

2. Abstract sequential (AS) persons live in an orderly, mentally stimulating world where polysyllabic words, ideas and concepts, and accredited experts are valued. This style is characterized by the need to validate the concrete world through intellectual logic. They judge carefully before acting, thus may appear outwardly aloof.

3. Abstract random (AR) people are outgoing and emotional, highly inclined to first impressions and snap-judgments. They rely on intuition to validate their world. They consider time and schedules restrictive and consequently often appear disorganized. They are more concerned with relationships than with ideas, preferring to work in groups.

4. Concrete random (CR) persons are characterized by the needs to prove to themselves, to recreate, to reapply, to invent, as their means of understanding the world. They tend to depend only on themselves and live for the choices they can make. This often makes them seem like the instigators they can be.

Gregorc's model has been validated with adults and college students (1989) with correlations on each scale (CS, AS, AR, CR) falling between .6 and .7; the instrument was also found to be 81% reliable. To date, little

work has been done to examine the interactive nature of style using this instrument. With the student teaching situation being a highly interactive experience, it would seem to be rich ground from which to collect this type of data.

One purpose of this case study was to compare and contrast the different styles of one student teacher and his supervising teacher as described by the Gregorc Style Delineator (1985a). A second purpose was to qualitatively examine the relationship which developed and document the interactions which occurred between the student teacher and his supervising teacher. The third purpose of this study was to reflect upon the significance that understanding style might have for relationships and interactions that occur during the student teaching semester and the importance of further study in this area.

The confounding factor in this study was the fact reported by the student teacher early in the student teaching semester that he had been labelled 'learning disabled' as a child. His explanation to the supervising teacher was that he had had an "eye-tracking problem" but that it had been corrected some time ago. During a visit with his mother, this researcher learned that her perception of his problems in public school included organization, written work, and comprehension stemming from a reading

difficulty. Though she did not elaborate on the problems, she did explain that after he was diagnosed in second grade, he was put in an LD program for one year. She then disclosed that in grade four she removed him from the LD program and began to work with him herself. She did not mention an eye-tracking problem.

A learning disability is a handicapping condition which may occur in a person of average or above average intelligence and can often be characterized by erratic performance, segmented operational styles, and irrational or inconsistent behaviors (Public Law 94-142). Learning disabilities are not synonymous with learning 'problems' because those are relegated to achievement levels in the bottom 20% of a class. Eye -tracking is considered a learning disability by one school of thought but not by most educators.

Most labels like "LD" are no longer a factor by the time students reach the senior year in college because they have learned how to compensate for their own differences and needs. How then does a college student who wants very much to become a teacher but who operates in the "abstract random" manner described by Gregorc survive a "concrete sequential" student teaching experience?

Data Description

The student teacher, a good-looking, personable young man, made an excellent first impression on staff and principal during spring visits the previous school year. He reported that staff and students "provided a warm greeting" for him and seemed "nice", leaving him with "great first impressions." He was a traditional college student with GPA of 2.63. The supervising teacher was a middle-aged woman who had had 12 years of experience and several previous student teachers.

In order to complete his program by December, this student opted to take his final methods courses compressed into two-hour daily sessions for ten weeks during the summer. The summer methods instructor notified the university supervisor at the end of the session about this student's difficulty with the shortened semester; characteristics noted were a) his ability to memorize but not to integrate material quickly unless it had become routine, b) his need for a tight structure and slower pace, and c) the strength of the student's auditory channel over the visual one.

The student teaching placement which had been made at random the previous fall semester by supervisory staff, was reexamined in light of this information. The university supervisor visited the school, talked

with the principal about the student's needs, and decided that the original placement would be satisfactory. However, the student teacher would be given a choice as to length of assignment: a single assignment lasting sixteen weeks with one supervisor or the more common pattern of two eight-week assignments. He chose the sixteen week option.

At the start of the semester, this student teacher and his third grade supervising teacher voluntarily agreed to complete the Gregorc instrument and participate in the study. The student teacher measured a strong tendency to operate from an "abstract random" (AR) style while the supervising teacher measured highly "concrete sequential" (CS) on the Style Delineator. Both student teacher and supervising teacher received information about this model of style at this time and were encouraged to reflect on the effect of their styles as needed. The researcher/university supervisor's style scores served as a complement to both because she scored equally high in "concrete sequential" and "concrete random."

Data were collected in multiple formats throughout the sixteen weeks and included original observation documents, transcripts of audio recordings of interviews and conferences, logs, and questionnaires. All three participants provided data.

The two main topics of interest which will be examined, time and structure, are strong indicators of a person's style. As noted earlier, a person with a tendency to operate as a CS, values time and structure and can use them efficiently and effectively. A more AR operator finds time and structure restrictive and prefers to spend that time developing relationships, not planning for the future. Though they could be viewed as two separate issues, time and structure become intertwined in the teaching situation and so will be discussed concurrently.

The classroom supervisor appeared to be well-organized. She had several file cabinets full of neatly filed lesson ideas and planned units which she had used over the years. She and the teacher next door shared students for reading and math and spent time at the beginning of the year arranging a suitable and efficient schedule for both to follow. She also appreciated the fact that the time factor needed to be considered in order to structure the material covered each year, requiring daily, weekly, and monthly pacing of lessons.

The student teacher exhibited behaviors characteristic of his random style. These included his emphasis on relationships and the need for positive feedback and unconditional friendship from those around him, young and old, several variations on use of time, and a devaluing of

organizational methods, in general, and planning lessons and units, in particular. For example, early in the semester the student teacher's use of classroom time for direction-giving looked haphazard. Time lapses (up to two minutes) were noticed prior to giving directions but after worksheets or tests were passed out, pauses occurred between various parts of complex directions, and interruptions came in the middle of a seat activity for the purpose of completing or rewording directions, making direction-giving less than effective.

An example of ineffective directions which were given in the sixth week resulted in a near injury. The student teacher set the children up for a blindfold activity by discussing what it would be like to have a guide dog. He then announced that the activity would be outside, explained the need for safety, and then led them outdoors saying, "Do not talk to your partner, just lead them around." Since sighted children were observed pushing, pulling, and swinging blindfolded children around, it was concluded that the children did not understand the directions, objectives, or constraints needed for the activity. When he realized the difficulty that the children were having with this activity his remark to conclude it was, "Line up and go in." At this, the children ran across the playground to the door. The student teacher chastised the children afterwards by

saying, "I thought I'd be 'nice' and let you do a fun activity."

After this activity, the need for setting specific objectives for activities (i.e., HOW do guide dogs lead their masters?) and pre-planning the directions, was discussed with the student teacher in relation to the effective use of instructional time. He could discuss the rationale for advance planning of direction-giving but preferred a more AR stance; he felt that it was difficult to go over directions for activities in advance because the needs of the children for that moment could not be predicted; he preferred to wait and see what happened when he passed out the worksheet or began the activity.

Another example of this student teacher's time use also involves attention to details. The supervising teacher didn't understand what she termed his "dead" time. During the early part of the semester when he was not "on stage," he left the room. Even after we reminded him that he needed to stay in the room so he could pick up ideas from her or take notes as she taught, he seemed to stare blankly and sit inactively. When asked how he remembered specific details he replied, "I grasp them and if they are very, very important, I write it down". Nor did he notice little things that needed to be done in the room like pictures hanging crookedly on the wall, paper on the floor, or lockers that needed straightening.

Planning and structuring lessons was a third area in which the student teacher differed from his supervising teacher. He also had difficulty using a planbook. During his early teaching he had trouble writing weekly plans for more than one subject so one week the supervising teacher allowed him the freedom to plan day-by-day. He soon discovered that he had just as much trouble creating satisfactory plans using that strategy. The supervising teacher offered him the schedule and suggested that he zerox it and staple it into the planbook if he didn't want to spend time writing it in each week. She spent time showing him the kind of organizational procedures she used and suggested various types of organizational structures that he could use. By the sixth week he was creating an overview of the basics of each of his lessons (main concepts, goals and objectives, pages, worksheets, audio-visual materials) but was still not writing anything in his planbook. He later revealed that he had lost the planbook and was too embarrassed to mention it. Eventually he devised a system using a folder for each subject into which he inserted the plans for the week. The supervising teacher commented on his planning style:

> Part of lesson planning helps solve time or scheduling problems by using a weekly planning system. One can see the length of time of each class and plan accordingly. I think I will suggest he write the times of the class on the outside of the folder. He is a day by day

person whereas I can see the end of the week.

Another area of concern related to professional classroom behaviors. Though the student teacher related well to the children and motivated them on the strength of his pleasant personality, he often over-motivated them. The children were fairly quiet while the supervisor taught but chatted freely when the student teacher taught. In mid-October he reported that the chatting didn't bother him but that he was working on being more consistent when disciplining the children and he had "stopped being Mr. Nice Guy." Another reason that he found it difficult to exert his professional status was because he also coached a local sports team every day after school and many of the school's children were involved. He could not easily see himself in a different relationship to the children during school hours. It was also very difficult for him to relate to his supervisor as a peer. She felt he was still "focused on himself" as a student, not growing and changing into a teaching professional and not able to team teach alongside her.

Throughout the semester the supervising teacher remarked about the student teacher's approach to the feedback she tried to offer. She took careful written notes of both effective and less effective happenings and left them on his desk. Later, when she asked him what he thought, he was

blank, asking no questions, seeking no details, and giving no thoughts until the supervisor chose specific points to be orally discussed. By the middle of October she was attributing this to his "randomness," reflecting that "he didn't connect with written" material until it was spoken. He also seemed to need constant oral praise for his efforts. "How many times can I pat someone on the back? He wants a more verbal supervisor" who gives more positive feedback. It was difficult for him to hear even well-deserved criticism; "She really got me, she hit a sore spot, I'm busted," were his string of comments after her comments on a poorly planned lesson during a poorly planned week mid-semester.

By mid-November, when the same lack of planning and disorganization issues had recurred a number of times, and time for teaching a solo period neared, the supervising teacher suggested the need for more drastic measures. She felt that she had "carried" him most of the semester and wanted him to prove that he could handle all the variables of teaching on his own. In order for her to feel comfortable allowing him to do this solo teaching in her classroom, she had to see his lesson plans for the entire two weeks, in advance. To strengthen the force of this request we created a written performance agreement which listed dates by which each group of lesson plans had to be completed. All parties

signed this document. This further helped the student teacher realize the importance of becoming overtly organized while it helped the supervising teacher feel that the student was becoming mentally prepared.

Though the solo teaching was marked with many of the same concerns seen throughout the semester, the student teacher felt that he had "communicated well, that they understand me." The routine items had become mechanical but the qualitative issues remained questionable in the mind of the supervising teacher.

Conclusions

The data show distinctive differences between the operational style and thought processes of the student teacher and his supervising teacher. Characteristic of the supervisor's natural CS style tendency (Gregorc, 1985b), the supervising teacher was able not only to juggle the many variables but also was able to stand back and reflect with objectivity upon the significance of the style differences evident throughout the developing relationship. She struggled with the communication and feedback needs of the student teacher which were different from those she was most comfortable offering. She also allowed him to experiment with loose lesson planning, last-minute organizational patterns, and spur of the moment direction-giving. Though not a formal "training," the

sessions between supervising teacher and university supervisor were frequent (weekly or more often) and composed of clinical supervision and communication topics, as well as "style" issues. The student teacher was often involved in the discussions.

The student teacher in this case operated in a highly random and subjective manner. He was concerned about being "nice" to the children and having "fun" activities for them so that they would like him. These kinds of comments demonstrated his proclivity for using emotional connections to describe situations. He had great difficulty separating himself from situations and tended to use his "style" as an excuse for his actions. He operated frequently on impulse, often letting impetuousness dominate his planning. Corrective feedback, even discussions of alternative actions, were often taken as a personal affront. These kinds of actions and feelings are natural to persons who tend to operate in a highly AR fashion (Gregorc, 1985b).

The relationship between the two had both highs and lows. When things were going well, the interactions seemed like a thriving relationship. However, since inconsistency was the rule in the student teacher's operational behavior, the supervising teacher often felt that she was putting in more time than she bargained for, that she had one more

"student" in her class instead of a partner teacher. The kinds of forecasting, scheduling, and organizing behaviors which were easy for the supervisor seemed to be an impediment to the student teacher. Having a strong CS tendency facilitated her objectivity when discussing difficult situations, but the student teacher found these discussions frustrating because his point of view tended to be highly subjective.

The rapport issue was complicated in this case. The parties were friendly on a personal basis but did not seem to be compatible on a professional basis. Their basic views of the classroom, children, and instruction were alike, but the means to the ends were quite different. No teaching situation is simple. Issues of style, maturity, experience, learning differences, and processing difficulties add to the overall effect of personality. One lesson learned from the Gregorc instrument shows us that even a single person is a complex being. When two or more persons are part of the formula the variables multiply.

Implications for Teacher Education

While it is neither practical nor realistic to consider matching ALL student teachers with classroom supervisors, critical cases like this one point to the fact that some situations need special handling. Knowing more about the natural, operational behavior of those involved in the

relationship, and predicting outcomes of the interactions of those persons might mean the difference between a satisfactory student teaching experience and an unsatisfactory one. This knowledge might also assist teacher educators to retain and enlarge the pool of effective cooperating teachers by creating an awareness and appreciation for strong style types with which to place critical case student teachers.

This case also seems to support Gregorc's notion that a random style may look like a learning disability or vice versa. In fact, Gregorc (1987) and others (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987) have questioned the nature of the "learning disability" label as commonly applied in public school classrooms. Gregorc felt that since traditional schools are very much concrete and sequential operations (1985b), some abstract and random children who have difficulty fitting this orientation could be inaccurately labelled as learning disabled (1988). Once labelled, people might skew expectations of themselves to fit the label. If a behavior could be seen as a "style" rather than a "disability," might those expectations be geared more to a positive "How do I complement the system?" than a negative "What's wrong with me?" attitude.

We do not know how this student teacher might have reacted to a supervising teacher with a style more like his own. We do know that

effective classroom teachers who tend naturally to operate more randomly can and do adapt with varying degrees of success to the requirements of the structured school system.

From this initial description of a style interaction, there seems to be a wide range of application for teacher educators considering training of their classroom supervisors. Common topics such as communication skills and the communication process, individual needs for amount and types of feedback can be enhanced by the knowledge of the less common topic--understanding style-related operational behaviors. Further research regarding the viability of a style component such as the Gregorc model in the training of supervising teachers and/or student teachers, appears to be warranted.

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